

The Great Pumpkin

by Brendan Borrell

The Patch

Quinn Werner's backyard pumpkin patch overlooks a wooded creek. In the winter, when the maples and oaks stand like toothpicks and snow coats the western Pennsylvania valley, Werner gazes out his kitchen window and caresses his prizewinning seeds. The topsoil is frozen solid, and his orange tractor sits unused in the garage. He is not a big
5 talker, but every Thursday his buddy Dave Stelts phones him, and their conversation always comes back to springtime—to the pumpkin patch and the weigh-off.

In April, Werner germinates his seeds, each one as long as a quarter, by soaking them in a mix of hydrogen peroxide and water. He pots them and incubates them in a cooler with heating pads.

10 He then places the seedlings under fluorescent lights upstairs in what he calls his pumpkin room. On nice days, he takes the little pots outside for an hour or two for fresh air and natural sunlight. In May, every seedling is planted in the patch under its own clear plastic tent fitted with incandescent bulbs that are switched on during chilly nights.

15 Within weeks, the vines stretch out from underneath the plastic like octopus arms. In June, when the first golden trumpets of female flowers begin to open, Werner pollinates them by brushing them with pollen-covered stamens from select male flowers. Then he covers them with plastic cups to prevent honeybees from meddling.

20 When I visited Werner's property on a sweltering summer afternoon, he was checking his patch for the third time that day. Werner straddled the orange mesh fence that surrounds his garden and waded through a sea of stiff, broad leaves toward a thigh-high dome covered by an old bedsheet.

25 His 12 pumpkins had been growing for less than a month, so I had expected that one would be small enough to hoist into the back seat of a car. Werner whipped off the sheet, and there sat a shiny pale pumpkin (they turn orange later in the year) that seemed to sag on one side like a mound of Silly Putty left out in the sun. Based on its circumference, he guessed it was pushing 400 pounds (180 kilograms). And the season had just begun.

Werner beamed. "It's real long and real wide," he said. "It's in really good shape."

But as he leaned in closer, running his hand along a smooth ridge, his face grew taut. "Oh, man, as a matter of fact, it's split."

30 Tucked into the blossom end of the pumpkin was a tiny crack. Even if the crack wasn't enough to disqualify the fruit from competition (and it was), it could widen and let in bacteria that would quickly rot the pumpkin from the inside. "That makes me sick," he said. "This is the reason why I grow so many."

35 Werner and his pal Dave Stelts are competitive gardeners who vie for bragging rights and prize money ranging from a few hundred to thousands of dollars. Their crop of choice is the Atlantic Giant Pumpkin, a freak of nature and intensive breeding. During peak growing season, these pumpkins can gain 50 pounds (23 kg) per day—which is sometimes too much. The cracked pumpkin Werner showed me had swollen too quickly after a hard rain.

40 In general he has kept about two-thirds of his colossal gourds intact. In 2008, he earned the title of "grower of the year" after trucking pumpkins to six weigh-offs and winning five. His pumpkins had an average weight of nearly 1,500 pounds (680 kg). "I lost by two pounds in the sixth," he says.

45 Since the 1980s, giant pumpkins have tripled in size, thanks to strategic breeding and hardcore growers with time on their hands and dirt under their fingernails. (From April to October, Werner spends six to eight hours per day tending his garden.) Thomas Andres, a squash expert who works at the New York Botanical Garden, has predicted that the first pumpkin weighing one ton (2,000 pounds, or 900 kg) will appear in 2014.

50 The Ohio Valley contest, Werner's local weigh-off, is one of the more than 80 competitions in the "Great Pumpkin Belt," an area that stretches across North America from Washington State to Nova Scotia. This is prime pumpkin territory. The region has 90 to 120 frost-free summer days, but is cold enough in winter to keep plant diseases and pests in check. The weigh-offs are friendly competitions, but they're also a form of at-home science. Growers meticulously graph their pumpkins' growth curves and share successes and failures—and seeds—with their peers.

60 "By God, if we can get a pumpkin up to a ton, imagine what we can do with somebody's vegetable crop," says Stelts, president of the Great Pumpkin Commonwealth.

65 "What we are doing will be reflected on the dinner table of America."



At a pumpkin contest in Rhode Island, a pumpkin is transported for weighing.